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ABSTRACT

Noting that drawing and painting offer very young children powerful ways to explore and communicate thoughts and feelings, this booklet for caregivers and teachers offers suggestions related to painting and drawing for children under 3 years. The booklet discusses what young children can do with drawing and painting materials, including exploring and gaining control of materials. The booklet further presents information on how children develop drawing and painting skills, noting that regular opportunities to use good materials in the company of an interested adult and other children encourages the gradual development of more complex arrangements of lines, dots, and shapes. The adult's role in the process is discussed, with suggestions provided for things to say, and suggestions for supporting, enhancing, and extending children's abilities. Also examined in this booklet are the use of space and the selection of materials and equipment. Recipes for paint using corn-flour paste and food dye are included. (KB)

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DRAWING AND PAINTING WITH UNDER-THREES

By Ursula Kolbe and Jane Smyth

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By Ursula Kolbe and Jane Smyth

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About the Authors

A common interest in children and the arts has led Ursula Kolbe and Jane Smyth to many conversations about drawing and painting for very young children. These discussions form the basis of this book.

Ursula Kolbe has been involved in early childhood education for more than twenty years as a teacher, lecturer, writer, filmmaker, and artist. Formerly a lecturer at the Institute of Early Childhood and artist-teacher at Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Centre, Macquarie University, Sydney, she is now concentrating on her own studio practice as a painter. Previous publications include *Clay and Children—More than making pots (1997) AECA Resource Book Series (Volume 4 Number 2).*

Jane Smyth is a former teacher of Child Studies at the Canberra Institute of Technology and is now an early childhood consultant and director of Jane Smyth and Associates, a work and family consultancy which delivers workplace programs for parents. Previous publications include *Let's Tell Stories—Sharing stories with young children (1996) AECA Resource Book Series (Volume 3 Number 3).*

Drawing and painting engages young children's senses and nourishes their minds.

DRAWING AND PAINTING WITH UNDER-THREES

By Ursula Kolbe and Jane Smyth

This book is for all who work with children under three years. It offers a range of suggestions. These should, however, be adapted to suit individual abilities, strengths and interests, of young children.

Why offer drawing and painting to under-threes?

Very young children gain immense satisfaction from drawing and painting. These are experiences which engage their senses and nourish their minds. With every drawing or painting stroke children make, a mark appears—something which wasn't there before. This gives them a sense of power and competence.

More than this, drawing and painting offer rich opportunities to create meaning. By the time they are 18 to 20 months, children may begin to use some of their drawn or painted marks to stand for people, objects, or happenings. That is, they begin to use mark-making as a language. This is a remarkable achievement.

Drawing and painting, then, offer very young children powerful ways to explore and communicate thoughts and feelings. They enable children to make their ideas visible to themselves and others.

Drawing and painting offer very young children powerful ways to explore and communicate thoughts and feelings.

What can young children do with drawing and painting materials?

From birth, children are explorers. They are immensely curious and eager to investigate everything around them through sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. The urge to make marks with fingers begins very early.

This book focuses on children's use of drawing and painting implements that enable them to make marks.

Exploring materials

When first given drawing and painting materials, children explore the materials. They study intently the marks that appear as they move a crayon or brush. A sheet of paper becomes a 'play space'—an area where surprises and transformations happen. The idea of making a picture, however, does not occur.

This 23-month-old is an experienced drawer who has had many opportunities to investigate a texta. She knows to keep the texta within the confines of the paper and to steady the paper with her other hand. On this occasion she began with her favourite colour. The marks that result from her movements fascinate her. If we learn to look at what is happening we'll see this is more than 'scribbling'.

Interested onlookers keep her engaged and focused.

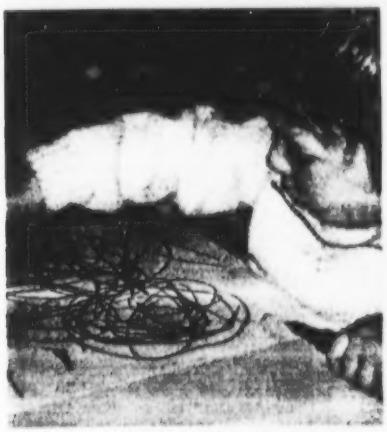
The six-month-old is learning by watching.

A fresh piece of paper.

'They're the same size!' Comparing the textas—an example of discoveries children make when drawing.

Being free to choose a colour adds to a child's experience.

ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT The new colour is a surprise.



Mark-making involves transforming a piece of paper. It's about finding out how movements produce different marks, how lines can travel up and down, back and forth, round and round.

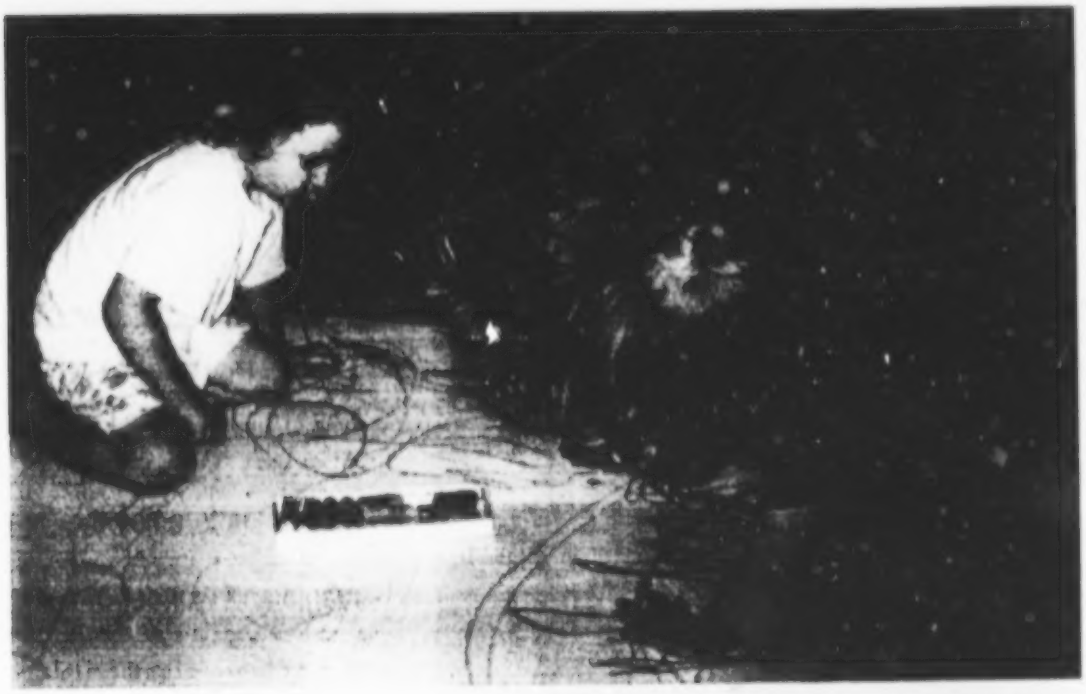
Gaining control over materials

Children learn to make a range of different marks through having opportunities to explore the same materials over and over. In this way they develop skills and gain control over the materials. It doesn't help them when adults constantly change materials.

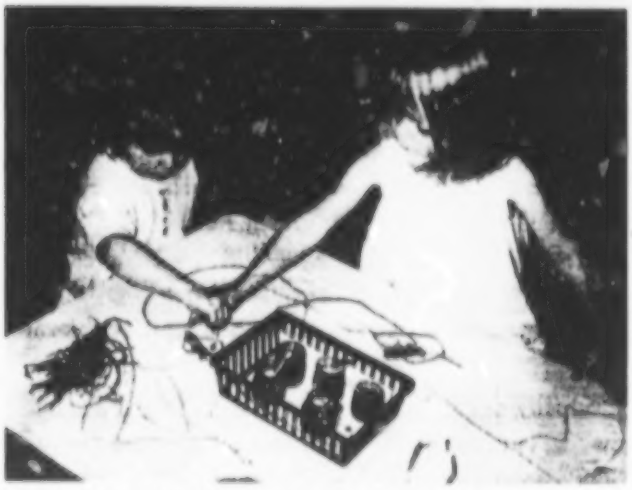
Children learn by watching each other. Regular opportunities to draw and paint alongside others are invaluable. Children have an ability to know what they need to know and ceaselessly 'borrow' from each other's gestures, words, and actions. The less experienced child learns from one who is more confident, while the more experienced child feels encouraged by someone watching with real interest.

Cap on ... Cap off ... A 21-month-old investigates a texta. As in any experience with small pieces of equipment, an adult must supervise.

To paint is to enjoy the magic and wonder of colour. It is to learn about brushes and how to make lines and patches of colour.



Partnerships provide encouragement, support, and help to further children's skills. These children are collaborating, but not in the sense of making a single drawing. They're learning to position their bodies so that each has space to draw. They learn to leave the box of crayons in the centre and to take turns using the colours. By watching each other they learn various ways of using a crayon.



This pair carefully adds lines to marks made by others. They use cotton buds in jars of food dye to make fine lines and dots. This requires care and concentration—a challenge for this age group.

Inspired by earlier efforts, these two children work on a new sheet of paper. Notice the similarity in their arrangements of lines. Each has drawn her family—each line stands for a family member.

How do children develop drawing and painting?

Children are born with tremendous potential and different dispositions. Each child, however, develops at his or her own rate and in his or her own way.

Many factors influence a child's development. We know that when young children have regular opportunities to use good materials in the company of an interested adult and other children, they will gradually make more complex arrangements of lines, dots, and shapes and will spend increasing lengths of time on these activities.

From their first experiences with mark-making children are fascinated by the marks they produce. Although they may frequently stop to gaze momentarily at others, children often quickly return to their own mark-making.

The first achievement for children is to learn to hold a crayon or brush firmly so that it can produce marks. Next, children learn to control their movements so that marks appear only on the paper and not on the table or easel. They learn to resist the temptation to lick the implements or make marks on themselves.

When young children have regular opportunities to use good materials in the company of an interested adult and other children, they will gradually make more complex arrangements of lines, dots, and shapes.

'Mummy'—some of the lines represent 'hair', 'legs', 'arms'.

'Trees'. The child began with vertical orange lines then changed to colour green, dabbing the brush to make small patches—'leaves'.

Painted one after the other, these paintings are by a 26-month-old. While similar in appearance, they have different meanings.

As children begin to control their movements they discover they can make all sorts of lines—straight, wiggly, curving. They find out how to make patches of colour. With increasing skills they begin using movements of the wrist rather than the whole arm, and delight in each new action and its results. For instance, very young children may discover how to make clusters of dots by rapidly lifting the crayon or brush and returning it to the paper. They enjoy the banging sound of this action and frequently add vocal sounds of their own.

Gradually, children discover how to make a shape by making circular markings. They may label a shape—'Ball', says 18-month-old Jenny, pointing to circular markings she's made. 'Snail', says 20-month-old Chris in response to a spiralling line emerging from his brush stroke. Of course, these children did not set out to create likenesses of specific objects. Instead, their marks remind them of certain objects, prompting them to name what they have made.

As children gain experience, their drawings and paintings become more complex.

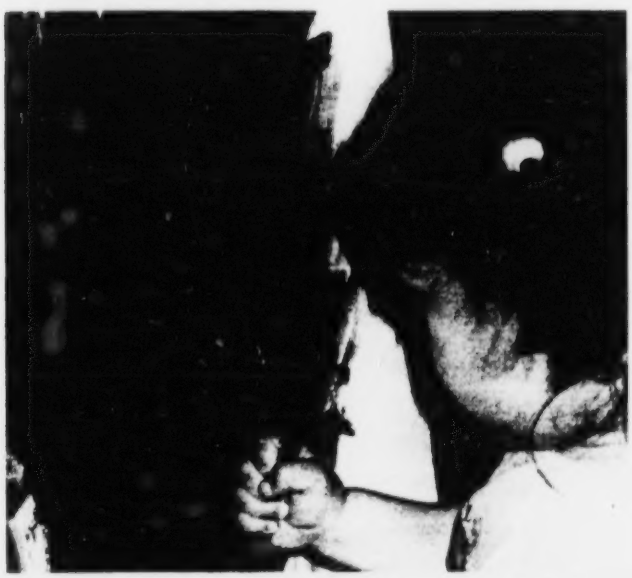
It is important for adults to understand that young children do not try to create a likeness of an object. Rather, they use marks to stand for people, objects, and happenings, or even for the sounds or movements of objects. A child's marks can just as easily stand for the flight of an aeroplane or the sounds of an elephant. 'That means he's making a loud noise', explains Jack, two years 11 months, pointing to lines he's made beside his drawing of a giraffe.

Later, children may use a greater variety of lines travelling in different directions. Shapes may appear within larger shapes, and children may attempt to position their shapes. When Mattie, 23 months, manages to place a small and barely visible mark in each corner of her paper, this is a considerable achievement.

What is the adult's role?

The role of adults is crucial. Sit beside children and watch closely what they do. Observe their gestures and facial expressions. Follow their gaze. What do they notice? Listen to their sounds and words.

Circles within circles is a common interest and one which children practise over and over.



Covering a sheet with paint is another way to explore the delights of paint. Typical of toddlers who enjoy covering things up, this painter covers other markings, making them 'disappear'.

Some children delight in keeping colours separate. These paintings by a child of two years eight months show careful rhythmical placement of patches.

Things to say

The starting point is to look closely at what children do. Observation is the key to knowing how to respond to children. Watch their actions and listen to what they say.

- **Give acknowledgement. Statements such as 'I can see you're making a big painting and you're working very carefully' may be all a child wants to hear.**
- **Take care with questions. It may be helpful to ask 'Would you like to tell me what is happening here?' This, however, can discourage children, particularly those unsure of their verbal abilities.**
- **Avoid asking 'What is it?' or guessing what marks represent. Very young children rarely aim to depict specific objects. As they move crayon or brush and watch marks emerge, ideas come to them. As they continue working, their ideas often change. Marks may not stand for anything at all or they might stand for a series of objects that change in identity depending on the person to whom the child is talking. Young children invariably want to please adults, and may say 'Yes', to guesses made by an adult.**

Keep in mind the following:

- **Genuine interest is often enough.** The adult who shows understanding and empathy is giving encouragement and may need to say nothing at all.
- **Comments based on careful observation may be helpful.** 'You've made a lot of lines and some dots, too!' Comments should focus on what children can do, not on what they cannot—'You've painted this shape very carefully!' Notice and comment on children's preferences. For example, 'I see you like using green!'
- **Materials and equipment should always be inviting.** The 'look and feel' of experiences for very young children is critical. Good conditions such as clean brushes and unmuddied paint help children to focus and concentrate. So it is very helpful to wipe brush handles and easels after each child or to replace muddied paint containers with fresh ones.
- **Materials influence what children can do.** Each medium has its own character. A fat crayon, a texta, or a large brush with fluid paint—each of these influences what children can do. Sometimes a particular medium can hinder. For instance, a child trying to make small detailed shapes can become frustrated when working with a large brush and dripping paint. As under-threes are unlikely to ask for alternatives when in difficulty, it is up to adults to realise what children are attempting and to offer alternatives.

'Paint on my finger!' Toddlers often stop in surprise, or even consternation.

- **Working conditions are important.** Adults can help children find satisfactory ways of working. For instance, many children find it difficult to control marks when the paper they are working on is not stable. A loop of masking or sticky tape attached to the underside of the paper will anchor it.
- **'Sticky fingers' may upset very young children.** It helps to immediately wipe their hands for them. More mature children might be encouraged to go to the wash basin and then return to their work. Reassure them that their place will be waiting. Once children understand the value of pausing to clean their hands, they will do so without prompting.

How can adults support, enhance, and extend children's abilities?

More and more practitioners are documenting what children do in order to learn about children's thinking. By taking photographs and making notes of the 'making' process, by writing down or tape-recording children's words (particularly their conversations with each other), and by collecting dated examples of their work, adults learn a great deal. Documentation—especially when shared with other interested adults—helps you see ways to extend children's interests.

Adults need to think about ways to use time, space, and materials. These elements support and enhance what children do.

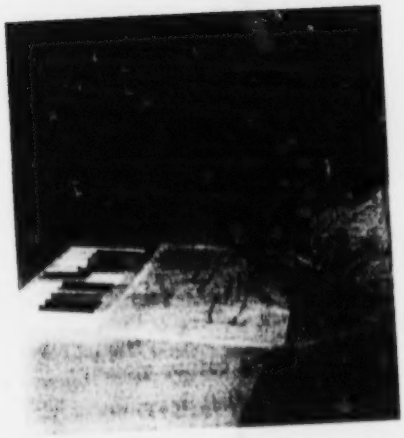
Keep in mind the following

The value of time

- Give children ample time to become familiar with materials. Unhurried, uninterrupted, and unstructured time to handle materials without having to 'make' something is essential.
- Time to repeat experiences over and over is crucial. Offer drawing and painting on a daily basis, if possible, but give children the choice of whether to engage in these activities or not. Children should never be required to produce a drawing or painting.
- Time for children to watch each other is essential.

Things to say

- **Invite comments on colours. Some children like to name the colours they've used, but you should avoid turning the conversation into a quiz on colour names. Young children have a sharp colour sense and colour memory, although they may not always remember actual names of colours.**
- **Give children gentle reminders. Among the most useful things you can do is to remind children—'Take your time'; 'Paint slowly'; 'Be gentle with the brush'.**
- **Notice particular interests. When a particular topic of interest arises—say 'rainbows' or 'tadpoles'—follow this up at the next opportunity. For example, ask a pair or trio if they would like to do another drawing or painting about this. Perhaps they would like a bigger sheet/other colours/darker or lighter colours? By enabling children to repeat things, you intensify their experience and encourage them to explore what is intriguing them. Instead of regarding their work as picture-making, think of it as a series of 'studies' or 'maps' that trace their thoughts over time.**



This table equipped with drawing materials, sticky-tape, and scissors is a permanent feature in a toddlers' playroom.

Being able to paint side-by-side adds to children's experience. Here children explore the colour blue—light and dark.

as they learn through this. In watching they give each other support and encouragement.

- Don't waste children's time. Avoid colouring-in sheets and other adult-designed activities aimed at making specific objects. These rob children of valuable time for developing skills and using marks to create meaning.

The importance of space

A permanent drawing corner or drawing table and a painting space is essential. This holds memories for children and helps them recall what they did in this space previously.

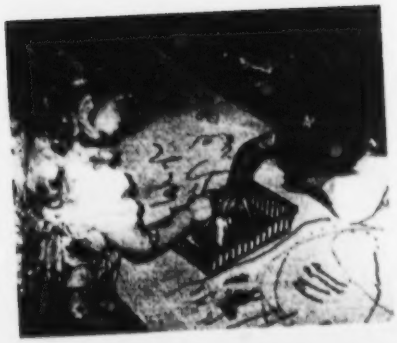
- Continuity and consistency are very important. Very young children feel secure when the environment is stable and predictable.
- When children return again and again to the same set-up they develop an understanding of 'what happens here'.
- An ordered and uncluttered arrangement helps children to focus clearly.
- Encourage the development of relationships by arranging furniture and equipment so the space is conducive to two or three children working beside each other. Invite children who regularly play together to work together in pairs and trios.
- Provide space to move freely. Place materials in positions that minimise the possibility of accidents. Be ready to rearrange the set-up so that all children are able to engage with the materials to the best of their abilities.
- Organise space so cleaning-up can be done quickly and efficiently.

The selection of materials and equipment

- Children's health and safety is the primary concern. Colours must be non-toxic and water-based. (Water-based materials are washable.) Buy only materials which are clearly labelled. Make sure you watch very young children whenever they handle drawing and painting tools and materials.
- Obtain materials that very young children can control easily. This means buying the simplest, easy-to-hold materials that produce rich, strong marks. Buy the best quality you can afford. Materials of good quality yield marks that attract and hold children's attention. Because very young children frequently don't use pressure when drawing, they require implements which make marks easily. Poor drawing materials and watery paint make pale, uninteresting marks.
- Begin with one or two easy-to-hold, non-toxic materials such as chunky short crayons, oil pastels, water-based felt-tipped pens or a short-handled brush and non-toxic water-based paint.
- Gradually offer a few more colours, but avoid offering too much choice. While some choice is fine, too much variety is confusing. When children have too much choice they often become distracted. They tend to try out everything on offer and lose focus.
- As children gain in experience they gradually widen their choice of colours and implements. Talk to children about the materials—what features do they notice?
- Materials for experienced drawers can include chalks; short, thick, coloured pencils; cotton buds with dye.
- Paper should be of medium weight. Avoid paper that tears easily. Drawing paper such as cartridge paper is suitable, so are bond paper, recycled office papers and architectural drafting sheets. Size of paper is important, as it influences children's movements. Give inexperienced children large sheets as it is easier for them to confine mark-making to larger surfaces than to small ones.

A white clothes-drying rack with white pegs shows paintings to advantage.

Watch young children whenever they handle drawing and painting tools.



Using cotton buds: This pair work in companionable silence. The emerging lines and colours fascinate them.

- Attach sheets to a table, floor, or easel so they remain stationary. This is very important—it is distracting to have paper move or flap about.
- Offer experienced children a choice of paper size. Some children like small sheets while others prefer large. Vary the shapes of paper over time. For example, provide long, narrow sheets for a different experience.
- For children under two years provide paint in plastic paint pots with lids. If you use coloured lids, make sure the lid colour corresponds with the paint colour. (It's confusing for the child to see one colour on the lid and another on the brush.) It is not essential to provide lids to experienced children. Some practitioners find that children over two years of age can paint competently without lids and that it adds to interest and enjoyment to peer inside the pot.
- Have paper towels ready for wiping up spills. Place plastic sheeting underneath easels. Provide plastic aprons, but do not fuss if children do not wish to wear one.
- Have a pen handy for writing children's names and dates of work (preferably on the back of the paper). Have a hanging space ready for wet paintings. To store children's work, make folders or purchase large plastic sleeves.

Paints

You can purchase paint or make paint with cornflour paste and food dye. Whichever you choose, make sure colours are non-toxic.

Colours should be inviting and paint should flow easily. As children gain in experience, broaden the range of colours and include pastels as well as grey and black. For a change, use white on black paper. To remove paint stains from clothing, soak in cold water.

Purchased paints

The most suitable paint is tempera, available in powder form as well as ready-mixed in a range of colours including black and white. (Tempera powder is the more economical.)

- To use, mix powder with a little water to make a paste then add more water. Generally you need two-thirds powder to one-third water.
- To economise, extend the volume by adding a small amount of cornflour paste.
- Start with red, blue, and yellow and also green. (You can make green yourself by mixing blue and yellow, but it won't be as vibrant as the bought variety).
- Gradually add other colours as well as black, brown, and white.
- Mix white with other colours to make pastel colours and with black to make a variety of greys.

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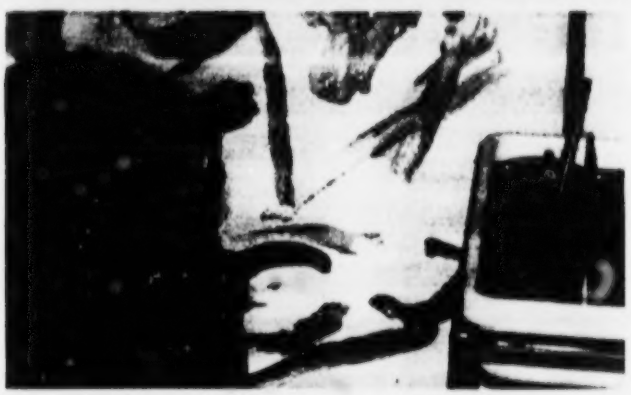

Working on a large scale: An experienced pair, able to sustain work on a large scale, share six different colours.

The pair swap sides and embark on their second paintings. This painting repeats features of the first and shows feeling for order and symmetry—an example of how children do not work randomly and how they pursue interests in successive paintings.

Children's health and safety is of primary concern. Ensure paints are non-toxic, whether purchased or made.

Making paint

Cornflour paste
Recipe 1

- Blend three heaped tablespoons of cornflour to make a thick cream.
- Add one-and-a-half cups of boiling water, stirring all the time.
- Add more water until the mixture is clear and suitable to use with a brush. *(It will thicken as it cools.)*
- Add a few grains of food dye and stir with a brush.
- Test the colour on a piece of paper.
- Add more dye if necessary.

Food dyes (edible vegetable dyes) yield brilliant colours. You need only buy red, blue, and yellow, as these mix to make purple, orange, green. Dyes are available from art suppliers and good toy stores. You can also use liquid dye from supermarkets, but these colours are weaker in strength.

Cornflour paste
Recipe 2

- Blend 12 level tablespoons of cornflour with one cup of cold water and add sufficient boiling water to the whole to make a litre.
- Boil for one minute until clear and thick.
- Add dye as per recipe 1.

Food dye dissolved in water

Offer this in tiny containers for painting with cotton buds at a table.

Suggestion

Soak a small quantity in a piece of sponge in a paint pot for use with brushes at easels.

Brushes

- Buy the best brushes you can afford.
- Start with short-handled stubby brushes 200mm to 250mm in width.
- Later buy finer brushes and also long-handled brushes.
- Provide one brush per paint pot.
- Always rinse brushes well after use and store with bristles upright.

Conclusion

Drawing and painting are among young children's most powerful ways to explore and communicate feelings and ideas. The presence of an adult in these experiences, however, is essential. Offer children your support and encouragement, and importantly, be mindful of children's health and safety at all times.

Buy the best brushes you

can afford.

Further reading

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The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA) is a leading specialist publisher of early childhood literature. It actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children from 0-8 and their families, and supports the important role of parents. AECA is also the national umbrella organisation for children's services.

As well as producing the Australian Journal of Early Childhood, *Every Child* magazine, the AECA Research in Practice Series, and special titles, AECA markets books and videos on early childhood topics from other companies and organisations.

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